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Hugo Chávez Departs

Published: April 13, 2002

With yesterday's resignation of President Hugo Chávez, Venezuelan democracy is no longer threatened by a would-be dictator. Mr. Chávez, a ruinous demagogue, stepped down after the military intervened and handed power to a respected business leader, Pedro Carmona. But democracy has not yet been restored, and won't be until a new president is elected. That vote has been scheduled for next spring, with new Congressional elections to be held by this December. The prompt announcement of a timetable is welcome, but a year seems rather long to wait for a legitimately elected president.

Washington has a strong stake in Venezuela's recovery. Caracas now provides 15 percent of American oil imports, and with sounder policies could provide more. A stable, democratic Venezuela could help anchor a troubled region where Colombia faces expanded guerrilla warfare, Peru is seeing a rebirth of terrorism and Argentina struggles with a devastating economic crisis. Wisely, Washington never publicly demonized Mr. Chávez, denying him the role of nationalist martyr. Rightly, his removal was a purely Venezuelan affair.

Public faith in Venezuela's institutions began eroding well before Mr. Chávez burst on the scene with a failed 1992 coup. Corruption discredited both main parties, and a patronage-fueled bureaucracy devoured the country's abundant oil revenues, leaving many Venezuelans desperately poor. Mr. Chávez was elected president in 1998 promising change he never delivered. He courted Fidel Castro and Saddam Hussein, battled the media and alienated virtually every constituency from middle-class professionals, academics and business leaders to union members and the Roman Catholic Church.

This week's crisis began with a general strike against replacing professional managers at the state oil company with political cronies. It took a grave turn Thursday when armed Chávez supporters fired on peaceful strikers, killing at least 14 and injuring hundreds. Mr. Chávez's response was characteristic. He forced five private television stations off the air for showing pictures of the massacre. Early yesterday he was compelled to resign by military commanders unwilling to order their troops to fire on fellow Venezuelans to keep him in power. He is being held at a military base and may face charges in Thursday's killings.

New presidential elections should be held this year, perhaps at the same time the new Congress is chosen. Some time is needed for plausible national leaders to emerge and parties to reorganize. But Venezuela urgently needs a leader with a strong democratic mandate to clean up the mess, encourage entrepreneurial freedom and slim down and professionalize the bureaucracy.

One encouraging development has been the strong participation of middle-class citizens in organizing opposition groups and street protests. Continued civic participation could help revitalize Venezuela's tired political parties and keep further military involvement to a minimum.

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